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Political and Merchant Devotees : Multiple facets of pilgrimage to the medieval region of Braj (16th and 17th centuries)

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Braj is the epicentre of the Krishna cult. The physical representation of the scriptural Braj *Mandala* as we see it today, however, is a medieval construct. During the 15th and 16th centuries, as a part of religious exercises or in the quest for the land of Krishna, the propagators of various *sampradayas* (sects) reached the region seeking spiritual solace. This process of rediscovering Braj and the settlement of the various sects was followed by a thronging of the region by merchant-followers and, subsequently, by Rajput rulers from the adjoining kingdoms of Rajasthan and Bundelkhand. The pilgrimage to Braj created an environment conducive for traders, especially from Gujarat and Punjab, to establish economic links with the region through a process of endowment and exchange. *Hundis* (bills of exchange) and wealth in the form of jewelry and gifts from businessmen coming to Braj on a pilgrimage significantly contributed to the development of the region. Of note, however, pilgrimage undertaken by Rajput *rajas* (kings) was certainly an attempt to assert their authority and raise themselves in the hierarchy vis-à-vis other rulers and nobles. As Braj came to be associated with the Mughals, this pilgrimage also meant allegiance to the courtly culture. This paper establishes that the Braj pilgrimage has served multiple purposes other than quenching one's spiritual thirst. It served as a medium for legitimising the accumulation of wealth by merchants through their contribution to religious activities. It was also a platform for the formulation of community bonds where monetary help in adverse times could be sought, and safer business travel ensured. Unlike most medieval institutions, which have withered away with the passage of time, pilgrimage to Braj *Mandala* in the neighbourhood of Vrindavan and Gokul - comprising a circuit of 84 *kos* (around 252 kilometres) - is still a living tradition.

Key Words : patronage, Braj Mandala, pilgrimage, Krishna, merchants, Rajputs, Mughals, legitimisation, Bhakti

Introduction

The Braj renaissance was the result of pilgrimage, which further led to its efflorescence into a hub for attracting political and mercantile patronage. This patronage led to temple building activities, the expansion of various settlements, and the flourishing of those sects inhabiting the region. This paper explores the ways in which pilgrimage to Braj became a medium for the transformation of merchants' crafts and wealth from the profane to the sacred level. For the political class, this pilgrimage was an assertion of their power, a journey to increase their authority and status. The peregrination of the *vans* (groves), shrines, ponds and *ghats* (embankments) generally formed the itinerary of the devotees. Further, popular temple complexes of various *sampradayas* (sects) - like the Gaudiya shrines of Govind Dev and Madan Mohan in Vrindavan, Pushtimarg temple of Shrinathji at Govardhan, and Radhavallabhi temple of Radha-

Vallabh at Vrindavan - were primary centres of the pilgrim's itinerary.

Formulating a Religious Region

Conceptualisation of regions and the emergence of regional identities reflect processes involving complex cultural, economical, political, lingual, and historical forces working in a particular geographical setting over lengthy periods of time (Schomer *et al.*, 1994:34). Thus, regions acquire multiple meanings in different contexts. However, for some regions their religious context overrides all other dimensions. Braj presents us with one such example where religion became the locus of all kinds of activities. Historically, religion intermingled with the political, commercial and the sectarian, and thereby, gave a unique identity to this area located between the Mughal capitals of Agra and Delhi.

[illegible]

There is no single or simple way of defining Braj. We adopt a nuanced approach to understand its scattered definitions. Through the prism of faith, Braj, meaning pastureland, is identical with the *Braj Mandala* of Hindu topography i.e. a circuit of 252 km in the neighbourhood of Gokul and Mathura where the divine brothers, Krishna and Baladev, are believed to have grazed their herds (Saxena, 1980:68). The entire Braj *Mandala* was conceived as a lotus comprising 12 *vans* (forests), 24 *vasas* (groves) with the city of Mathura as its centre (Figure 1).

Mathura also does not normally correspond to the religious demarcation of the pilgrimage circuit.

During Aurangzeb's time, the areas under the jurisdiction of Mathura comprised 18 *parganas* or administrative divisions: Mathura, Sahar, Mangottah,

Udai, Ao, Pahari, Khoh, Kamah, Noh, Khohri, Baluchi, Mujahid, Faridabad, Hodal, Mahaban, Sadabad, Jalesar, Kol and Anup Nagar. (Alavi, 1988:329-30) These have been termed as Braj country in a *parwana* (directive of Mughal officials) issued by Mukhtar Khan in 1705.

In cultural terms, Braj's traditions and language were disseminated well beyond the physical demarcation of the Braj *Mandala* and its political boundaries. Braj thus encompasses areas as far as present day Rajasthan. The significance of Braj is that it does not remain merely a physical region, but should be seen as an ideological one with its offshoots emerging in the entire subcontinent and beyond. Braj in general and Vrindavan in particular have been recreated along with their rich manifestations in art, architecture, music, literature, philosophy and economy (Goswami, 2003-4:213).

We can see it in the examples of Bishnupur of 17th century Bengal, Kanaka (golden) Vrindavan of 18th century Jaipur and in New Vrindavan of 20th century West Virginia (Goswami, 1996:270). Vaishnava imagery and literary culture was adopted by various Rajput courts that came in contact with Braj. It can be seen in Kishangarh paintings depicting Radha-Krishna imagery in the 18th century Rajput court as well as in the dramas conceptualised to recreate Braj, in which *lilas* (divine plays of lord Krishna) were performed. Thus, a pilgrimage centre like Braj became a site for transmission of both imagery and ideas (Rothfarb, 2012:24).

Vaishnava Landscape of Braj

The history of the emergence of Braj is also the history of the sects who played a central role in shaping the region. Each of the Krishanite *sampradaya* (sects) stemmed from the teaching of a spiritual leader, who, in some way or the other, wrought a variation on the *Krishnaism* presented in the *Bhagawata Purana* by emphasising one or the other aspect of devotional teaching (Snell, 1991:31).

The sect established by Vallabhacharya (1479-1530 CE), a Tailang Brahmin, was known as Pushtimarg (a path of grace). This sect focused on *vatsalya bhav* i.e. a feeling of parental fondness towards Krishna as the divine child (Snell, 1991:33). Most of their deities are worshipped in child form. Gokul, Mahaban and Govardhan, all related to the childhood adventures of Krishna, became centres for this sect. Vallabhacharya established the foundation of the temple of Shrinathji

with the endowment of merchant Purnamal Khatri from Ambala in 1499 CE (Hariray, 2012:12-13). He was succeeded by his son Vitthalnath, also referred to as Shri Gosainji in hagiographies of the sect known as *varta* (hagiographical accounts) literature. The primary deity of Pushtimarg is Shrinathji /Govardhanathji. However, there are eight other *savarupas* or deities worshipped by the *sampradaya*. By 1638 V.S/ 1581 C.E, the temples housing all the *navanidhis* (nine dieties) - Shrinathji, Navnitpriyaji, Mathureshji, Vitthalnathji, Dwarakanathji, Gokulnathji, Gokulchandramaji, Balkrishnaji, Madanmohanji - were constructed in Gokul and Gopalpur/Jatipura (near Govardhan) (Mittal, 1968:274).

Gaudiya *sampradaya* was started by Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1486-1533 CE), a Brahmin from Nabadwip in Bengal. He sent six *goswamis* (scholar-ascetics; spiritual leaders of the sects) - Rupa, Sanatan, Jiv, Gopal Bhatt, Raghunathdas and Raghunath Bhatt - to the region for reclamation of the places of Braj. These *goswamis* composed numerous works and constructed temples for their deities. Together, they created the core literature, giving shape to the philosophy of the school of Chaitanya (Dasa, 2007:375). The focus of this sect was *madhurya bhav* i.e. the sentiment associated with romantic and erotic love which the devotee feels by assuming the role of a *gopi* (cowherd maiden) (Snell, 1991:33). Chaitanya's concentration on the figure of Radha led to the cultic importance of Vrindavan in his *sampradaya* (Vaudeville, 1996:7). Unlike Pushtimargi *goswamis*, the Gaudiya *goswamis* did not marry and their line of successors continued through spiritual descent (Mittal, 1968:352). The *Gaudiya* shrines are located at Vrindavan. The areas of Radhakunda and Barsana were also under the influence of this sect.

Nimbark *sampradaya* was founded by Nimbarkacharya (said to have lived in the 12th century). The temples traditionally associated with this sect were located at several old sites in and around Mathura. However, it did not become as prominent as the two aforementioned *sampradayas*.

Haridas (1512-1573), (dates are contested, sectarian lit. suggest 1480 as his birth year and his death date is not certain, hence, it is safe to say he lived in the 16th century) an ascetic and a great musician, was the founder of Haridasi *sampradaya*. He is accredited with finding the deity of Kunjbihari/ Bankebihari in the grove of Nidhiban in Vrindavan (Entwistle, 1987:156). The famous musician of the Mughal court, Tansen, is said to have been his student and there are anecdotes of

Emperor Akbar travelling to meet Haridas (Nabhadas and Priyadas, 2014:Chappaya 91-Kavit 367). It is said that Raja Ram Singh Bundela of Orchha in Bundelkhand, who was the brother of Bir Singh Deo, offered to patronise the sect, but Haridas refused all kinds of patronage extended by Raja Ram Singh (Nabhadas and Priyadas, 2014:Chappaya 91-Kavit 367) and Akbar (even though we do not find mention of any substantial patronage extended to this sect by the Mughals).

Hit Harivansh (who lived during the early half of the 16th century)^[1] was the founder of the Radhavallabh *sampradaya*. The primary deity of the *sampradaya* was Radhavallabh and the main temple was located at Vrindavan. In this sect, Radha (beloved of Lord Krishna) assumed more importance than Krishna himself (Nabhadas and Priyadas, 2014:Chappaya 90-Kavit 364). Their main areas of influence were Vrindavan, Mansarovar and Barsana (Mudit, 1999:53-60).

These sects played a major role in the physical representation of Braj depicted in the *Puranas* (Hindu religious texts). Subsequently, temples were established throughout the region and it gradually transformed into an established settlement. However, this transformation would not have materialised without the patronage and support of political and mercantile groups.

Merchant *Bhaktas* and their Capital - Material vis-à-vis Spiritual

Affiliations with the aforementioned sects proved to be a strong vector through which mercantile groups provided a boost to the economy of the region. Merchants patronised temples and cults like Shrinathji at Govardhan, Madan Mohanji, Radha Vallabhji and Shriji at Vrindavan. Sectarian literature indicates that merchants were not a composite group - they ranged from petty shoe-sellers to 'greedy' shopkeepers, from moneylenders to diamond traders. *Banik* or *Baniya* was a generic term used to refer to all traders irrespective of their caste. There are anecdotes in *varta* and *Rasik Ananyamal*^[2] (Mudit, 1999) relating to Jain, Kayastha, Patel and Khatri traders. We also get glimpses of groups that can be termed as commercially significant such as dyers and sellers of cotton cloths.

Bhakti or devotional traditions brought not only fame to the region, but also substantial income (Richardson, 1979:64). *Hundis* were important sources of economic transaction and acted as a catalyst in bringing vibrancy to the region's economy. One such incident has been narrated in a *varta* (hagiographical accounts) where on the occasion of the marriage of Gokulnathji,^[3] a group of merchants coming to Gokul from Rajnagar in Gujarat gave five rupees as a gift, whereas another merchant from the group issued a *hundi* (bill of exchange) worth 1,000 rupees in the name of the Lord of Gokul^[4] (Hariray, 2009). The image of *bhakta* or devotee suited the interests of these merchants. If a merchant had social and commercial *sakh* (goodwill), his *hundis* or promissory notes would be honoured without much ado in the bazaar, where word of mouth carried great weight (Dalmia, 2008:48-9). Word of mouth thrived on relationships built on trust and social prestige. Further, it made it easier to take credit from the market in times of distress.

Rasik Ananyamal informs us about a merchant named Pahukardas who made his *Baniya* caste pure through his generous patronage. The temple of Shriji in Vrindavan was endowed by him in 1575 (Entwistle, 1987:405). He used to also do *vastrabhushan seva* i.e. gifting of jewellery and clothes at various temples of Braj. Thus, capital in various forms was making its way to the region. This capital, in turn, was being channelled into the economy of Braj in the form of investment. As is evident from one *farman* (an authoritative / imperial order) of Emperor Shah Jahan, Goswami Vitthalrai of Pushtimarg bought land in Jatipura / Gopalpur from *zamindars* (landlords) and funded the construction of buildings, gardens, cowsheds, workshops (*karkhanas*) for the temple of Govardhan in Jatipura *mowzah* (village), adjoining Gokul. He was exempted from various taxes such as the land tax, civil levies or imposts on manufacture (Jhaveri, 1928: dated AD 1631/ AH 1043. Farman No. 6). The Mughal ruler issued the grant of land in the *mowza* (village) of Gopalpur for the maintenance of these structures already endowed by the grantee, Vitthalrai (Jhaveri, 1928:Doc. No. VI, dated AD 1631/ AH 1043. Farman No. 6). The fund for these works perhaps came from merchant-followers of the sect.

Pilgrimage stimulated the mechanism of market networking as it served as a place of 'exchange' for

1. Date of birth 1502 C.E but date of death is contested, he died during early half of 16th century as his son took over in 1528 C.E.
2. A 17th century Radha Vallabhi hagiographical text written by Shri Bhagwat Mudit giving details about its followers.

3. Gokulnath is one of the *navnidhis* of Pushtimarg.

4. सो जितने वैष्णव विवाह पर गए सबन के संग पांच पांच रुपया भेंट के दिए और हजार रुपैया की हुंडी भेंट पठाई.

different merchants coming together at a religious platform. The pilgrimage economy involved the temples in two ways (Peabody, 2003:73). First, pilgrims came to the shrine to offer money to the deity and thus, injected capital directly into the local economy. Second, pilgrims also spent money in the local market on goods and services offered by the merchants (Peabody, 2003:73).

Hagiographical literature portrays a merchant's image as that of a money hoarder and emphasises that optimum utilisation of a merchant's wealth was for religious purposes. Profit-making through deceitful means was seen as the prime motive of these merchants and through one way or the other, the *guru* or their *sevaks* (disciples) transformed these greedy, worldly and misguided beings into humble devotees of Krishna. Rupa Goswami in his *Mathura Mahatmya* emphasises the significance of religious acts performed by merchants in Braj in the following verse:

If a person goes to Mathura with a purpose of doing business and takes his bath and eats his meal there, he is at once liberated from all his sinful reactions and goes to heaven (Rupa Goswami:Text 11 - Trans. Bhumipati Dasa).^[5]

It seems that the merchant's craft and wealth were considered profane and the only way to legitimise it was through religious means. This kind of portrayal is suggestive of religious legitimisation of a merchant's wealth when used for good purposes. This can be substantiated by narrating a *varta* where a rich merchant came to perform the Braj *yatra* with fellow Vaishnavas from Gujarat. On the way, one by one everybody had to get food prepared for the purpose of serving *prasada* to fellow Vaishnavas. When a poor Vaishnava was getting the food prepared, a dog's presence made it impure, but Gosain Vitthalnath did not ask him to prepare the *prasada* again whereas when the same thing happened to a merchant-pilgrim the very next day, the latter was asked to remake the *prasada*. When the merchant inquired he was told that he was prosperous enough to remake it as against the poor Vaishnava. Thus, the merchant was made to realise the optimum utilisation of wealth.

Infiltration of mercantile jargon in *Bhakti* poetry shows the significance of the alliance between the men of commerce and the *goswamis*, and this alliance played a crucial role in the development of Braj. Surdas, who according to Pustimargi literature was a celebrated

ashtachhap poet, in his *Sursagar*, constantly and metaphorically refers to traders and their business. He usually presents it in a religious context and tone. In the following verse, he seems to be legitimising the use of a merchant's wealth for religious and philanthropic purposes:

हम भई बनजारिणी , आपुन भये दानी कुँवर कन्हई |

कहा बनिज धो लै आई हम , जाकौ मांगत दान ||१५६७||

(Surdas, 1977: 629).

Gopi is saying that she is only a petty banjarin and is not making profits or getting returns from big business that the Lord is asking for charity from her

It seems that those who were accumulating 'profit' through trade were expected to undertake charity work and philanthropy.

The capital of merchants directly or indirectly was making its way into Braj from all over the subcontinent. A merchant named Jamnadas from South India gifted diamonds worth five lakh (Worth half a million rupees) rupees to Shri Gosianji of Pushti *sampradaya* (Hariray, 2009). Another *varta* informs us about a Khatri diamond merchant, who was expert in identifying land where diamonds could be found. He bought a diamond necklace for Gosainji Vitthalnath and sold diamonds worth 10,000 rupees to undertake a pilgrimage to Gokul (Hariray, 2009).

William Jason, a merchant, wrote in 1656 that Bell, a colleague of his, delayed his departure from Agra as

... several Banian Merchants of quality [sic], which came up to Matra [sic] and Gocall to worship, are returning to Ahmdebad, soe [sic] well attended with soldiers that it is conceived he may with them travaile [sic] safely (Foster, 1921:68-9).

Travelling with soldiers testifies to the fact that merchants were carrying valuables or precious items to the region for the purpose of trade, and pilgrimage was not the only reason for travel. There seems no reason for a large group of merchants to be accompanied by a retinue of soldiers, apart from the fear of robbery. *Varta* of Padmanandas informs us that the routes were infested with bandits, especially the one from Agra to Lahore via Delhi (Gokulnath, 2010:39-40). Wherever merchants were not accompanied by a retinue of soldiers, the association with Vaishnava community seems to have assured them some kind of safe travel. Travelling in the guise of pilgrims with a group of Vaishnava pilgrims seemed to be less risky than

5. *Anusangena gacchan hi vanijyenapi sevaya Mathura-snana- matrena papam tyaktva divam vrajet*

travelling as merchants. Besides, being associated with Vaishanava circles also formed a kind of community bond where monetary help in adverse times could be sought. Apart from monetary help, these well knit communities also offered religious support to fellow Vaishnavas living in far-off places (Saha, 2014:331).

We also have preliminary accounts of pilgrimages to the region during the Mughal period. One such account, *Bikaneri Yatri Vivran*, gives an exemplary description of Braj through the eyes of a pilgrim travelling during Shah Jahan's reign in 1713 VS/ 1655 CE (Nahta, 1959:112-13). He seems to be a Pustimargi, though his accounts tell us about all the temples of Braj, across sects. He informs us that the daily expense of the Shrinathji temple at Govardhan was approximately 40 rupees. He further informs the reader about his experience of *parikarma* (circumambulation) of Govardhan which he estimates to be around 8-9 *kos*. He throws light on the fact that the *devro* (temple) of Govind Dev located at Vrindavan was bestowed with daily offerings of several *maunds* (1 *maund* = 40 kg) of gold.

Politics of Pilgrimage - Interplay of Political Powers

Braj acquired a pan Indian character through its association with various political powers. The region received political pilgrims and patronage from the Mughals, non-Rajput nobles, Rajputs of Rajasthan, rulers of Bundelkhand, particularly Orchha, and so on. Geographically, Braj was surrounded by the political capitals of these powers. Rajput rulers and nobles had their individual interactions with religious leaders residing in Braj and undertook pilgrimages to the area, which were occasions for largesse and commencement of projects in the region (Rothfarb, 2012:24). According to sectarian literature and legends associated with Braj, all these political classes patronised and travelled to the region.

The Mughals contributed extensively to Braj's development by the issuing of revenue grants to temples. The *Mowza* (village) of Gokul was wholly granted by the way of charity to the Pushtimarg sect and was exempted from all kinds of taxes (Jhaveri, 1929:dated 1593 CE/1651 VS, farman No. 5). The 1598 *farman* (an authoritative order) of Akbar provided a total grant of 1,000 bighas to 35 temples in and around Mathura (See Mukherjee, 1988: 244). Thus, Vrindavan and Gokul, the two important religious settlements of Braj, can be seen as the products of Mughal patronage. These places turned

into large urban settlements, whereas earlier they were all groves with the exception of small temples built here and there. By appropriating Hindu religious institutions to serve the imperial ends - a process involving the overlapping of political and religious codes of power - the Mughals became deeply implicated in institutionalised Indian religions (Eaton, 2000:116).

Raja Man Singh, the Kacchwaha ruler and a noble in Akbar's court, endowed the reconstruction of Govind Dev in 1590, the most famous temple in Vrindavan. Through a *parwana* (directive/ permit), he ordered *mutasaddis* (clerks) that one *ashrafi* (a gold coin, rated at 16 rupee silver) and one rupee were to be given every day for the *bhog* (food offered to the deity) and *seva* (service) of Govind Dev (Perti, 1992:Document No. 7, NAI- 2671/2,23 Zulhijja 1016 AH 9 April 1608 CE). He is also said to have made grants towards the building of the *ghat* at Mansi Ganga tank near Govardhan (Fuhrer, 1969:100).

The Gopinath temple of Vrindavan was endowed by Raisal Darbari, a chief of the Shekhawat branch of the Kacchwaha, who fought for Akbar and assisted Man Singh on several of his campaigns (Entwistle, 1987:160). Raisal distinguished himself so greatly in the repulse of an Afghan invasion that Akbar bestowed upon him the title of Darbari, with a grant of land and command of 1,250 horses (Growse, 1880:253). The Shekhawat Kacchwahas to the northwest of Amber had been independent of Man Singh's control since the mid-15th century, and achieved a measure of imperial recognition in their own right from Mughal emperors (Srinivasan, 2014:556-7). Raisal and his cousin Man Singh backed opposing candidates as Akbar's successor. Raisal backed the eventual winner, Jahangir, while Man Singh supported Khusrau. As a result, Raisal was raised to the *mansab* rank of 3,000 under the latter (Growse, 1880:253). His patronising a temple in Vrindavan seems to be an assertion of Shekhawati authority and independent standing against his more powerful Amber cousins.

While members of the Kacchwaha lineage may have been the most prominent donors in the region, other leading Hindus associated with the courts of Akbar and Jahangir also vied for the prestige of endowing Braj's temples and sects (Talbot, 2012:359). The commitment of Raja Todar Mal to support temples of Govind Dev and Madan Mohan indicates that there was a status to be gained by getting involved in a project carrying imperial sanction (Asher, 1996:216). In 1584, Gopal Das - successor of Radha Vallabh, the *sevak* (temple servant here) of Madan Mohan temple received 100

bighas of land in the village of Rajapura in Khairat from Todar Mal (Habib, 1996:140). It is popular in the Gaudiya *sampradaya* that Todar Mal patronised the building of *tirthsathalas* (pilgrimage spots) which were being restored by Narayana Bhatta (Entwistle, 1987:160).

Bir Singh Deo, the king of Orchha, patronised Braj during the reign of Jahangir, and prominent amongst his endowments was the Keshav Dev temple in Mathura. At Vrindavan, he constructed numerous *ghats*, temples and gardens. He became the most prominent Rajput patron of Braj during the reign of Jahangir, the 'position' earlier occupied by Man Singh under Akbar (Rothfarb, 2012:68). In 1614, he visited Mathura where, on Vishram Ghat, he offered gold equal to his weight plus 81 *maunds* (1 maund = 40 kg), which were distributed as charity (Entwistle, 1987:175-6). A Rana of Udaipur, too, donated gold equal to his weight on the same *ghat*. Both of them endowed the construction of a paved terrace to commemorate the event. However, local folklore states that the Jaipur king (Kacchwhaha), who had started from Mathura to do a *tula daan* (weighing ceremony), went back in dismay at the news of such daunting munificence (Chakravarty, 1984:28). These instances seem to be symbolic of the assertion of authority vis-à-vis the more famous Rajput rulers - in this case Kacchwhahas - who were the most liberal patrons in Braj.

The *Surjanacarita*, the biography of Bundi's Surjan Singh Hada who surrendered his fort in Ranthambhor to the Mughals in 1569 and accepted the overlordship of Akbar, also attempts to connect him with Braj. Perhaps Surjan was encouraged to undertake a pilgrimage to Mathura as a testament to his affinity with the culture of the court (Talbot, 2012:359). The poem's casting of Surjan in the role of a pilgrim and lengthy description of his sojourn in Mathura-Vrindavan is particularly striking, because Surjan was never sent there for official purpose and could not have stayed very long (Talbot, 2012:356). Braj thus became an arena for associating oneself with popular religion and drawing legitimacy from it. This was achieved through the act of pilgrimage, patronising texts or architecture associated with the region, and producing the same at regional courts.

Poet Muraridas narrates how Man Singh had vowed on the eve of his departure on a Mughal military campaign against the kingdom of Mewar that he would

re-build and re-establish the temple of Govindadevji, who is worshipped by gods, at Vrindavan, so that the incarnation of Krsna

may be celebrated by the people (Sreenivasan, 2014: 577-8).

Nearly 40 years later, in the premises of the same temple, a *chattri* (cenotaph) was built during the reign of Shah Jahan to honour Bhim Rao, a prince of Mewar. The inscription at the *chattri* read:

संवत् १६६३ वरषे कार्तिक वदि ५ शुभदिने हजरत श्या
श्रीश्री शाहजहां राज्ये राणा श्रीअमरसिंहजी को बेटा राजा
श्री भीमजी री राणी श्री रंभावती चौबंडी सौराई द्वैजी ॥

In the year sambat 1693 (i.e. AD 1636) on an auspicious day, Kartik Badi 5, in the reign of Emperor Shahjahan, this chattri was erected by Rani Rambhavati, widow of Raja Bhim, the son of Rana Amar Sinh [sic] (translated by Growse, 1880:227).

Raja Bhim is said to have helped Shah Jahan during his struggle for the throne. Bhim became the chief advisor and friend of prince Khurram in his fight for the throne and in the disturbances that ensued he was slain by the imperial army (Tod, 1914:294-5). There were many temples in Braj, the *chattri* could have been built anywhere or perhaps independently of any pre-existing structures. However, the endowment of the *chattri* at the premises of the same temple, perhaps, was a contest and challenge to the temple patron's claim that the shrine was a victory symbol against the Sisodias of Mewar. This can also be seen as an attempted reassertion of power and of raising oneself in the hierarchy of Rajput nobles in the Mughal court.

Conclusion

Devotional journeys to Braj were very pragmatic, sometimes with large political and economic implications. Pilgrimage made the area a major hub for investment of capital, as merchants sought legitimacy in the process of accumulating wealth from trade. The support of this community was indispensable for the display of flamboyant religiosity which was being developed in the region. Braj's religiosity became a medium for bridging the gap between the binaries of the mercantile and the ascetic worlds. The latter is considered to be free from all kinds of worldly desires while from the former emanates all kinds of desires. The *goswamis* were the collector of perks in the markets of Braj and they established healthy connections with the commercial classes thronging to the sacred sites either as pilgrims or for the purpose of trade.

As Braj came to be associated with the newly discovered imperial and sub-imperial devotion, the region actually emerged as a platform for showing

one's political might through acts of pilgrimage and patronage towards various religious forms. The region thus emerged as a platform for the power play between Rajput nobles and non-Rajput nobles, where everyone wanted to have a stake in Braj. The Mughal *amirs* (nobles) served as patrons of architecture, particularly in developing the Mughal hinterlands (Asher, 1992:67). An association with popular religion that had imperial sanction was a source of prestige, status and authority. Rajput rulers, through the commissioning of architecture, showed their allegiance towards their Mughal overlords and, at the same time, asserted their political might vis-à-vis rival Rajput *rajas*.

The Mughals ensured the stability of the empire by collaborating with popular religious communities that claimed influence over large sections of the population during their reign. There was an imperial thoroughfare which connected the two capitals of Agra and Lahore, known as the Delhi road, to which Kos minars is a testimony (Growse, 1880:98).^[6] Thus, communication networks helped immensely in drawing pilgrims and traders alike, which, in turn, contributed to taxes (Growse, 1880:98). The Mughals thus, brought economic and political stability through their patronage of this imperial hinterland.

Besides, large areas in Braj were infested with bandits and rebels. Hagiographical literature belonging to various sects supports numerous instances where *sampradayas* acted as forces for controlling crime. One such *varta* tells us that when Vitthalnath was travelling from Gujarat to Braj, his caravan was attacked by a thief's group known as Kathariayas. He, however, inspired them to give up the theft and converted them to Vaishnavism^[7] (Hariray, 2009:16-17). By patronising sects and temples the State developed a process of large-scale urbanisation and reduction in recalcitrance which can be seen as an investment towards stable boundaries. The history of Braj's development during the Mughal period should be seen as a nexus between the political and the sectarian on one hand and the sectarian and the mercantile on the other. Amidst all this development, pilgrimage emerged as a central binding force.

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6. Kos minars were markers of distance during medieval times, just like modern day milestones. They were installed at every Kos, along the imperial highway, for the convenience of the traveller.

7. श्रीनाथजी ने कटहरिया के ऊपर कैसी कृपा करी है जो चोरी करत हतो और मनुष्य को मारतो हतो सो अब भगवत्लीला को आवाहन करे है।

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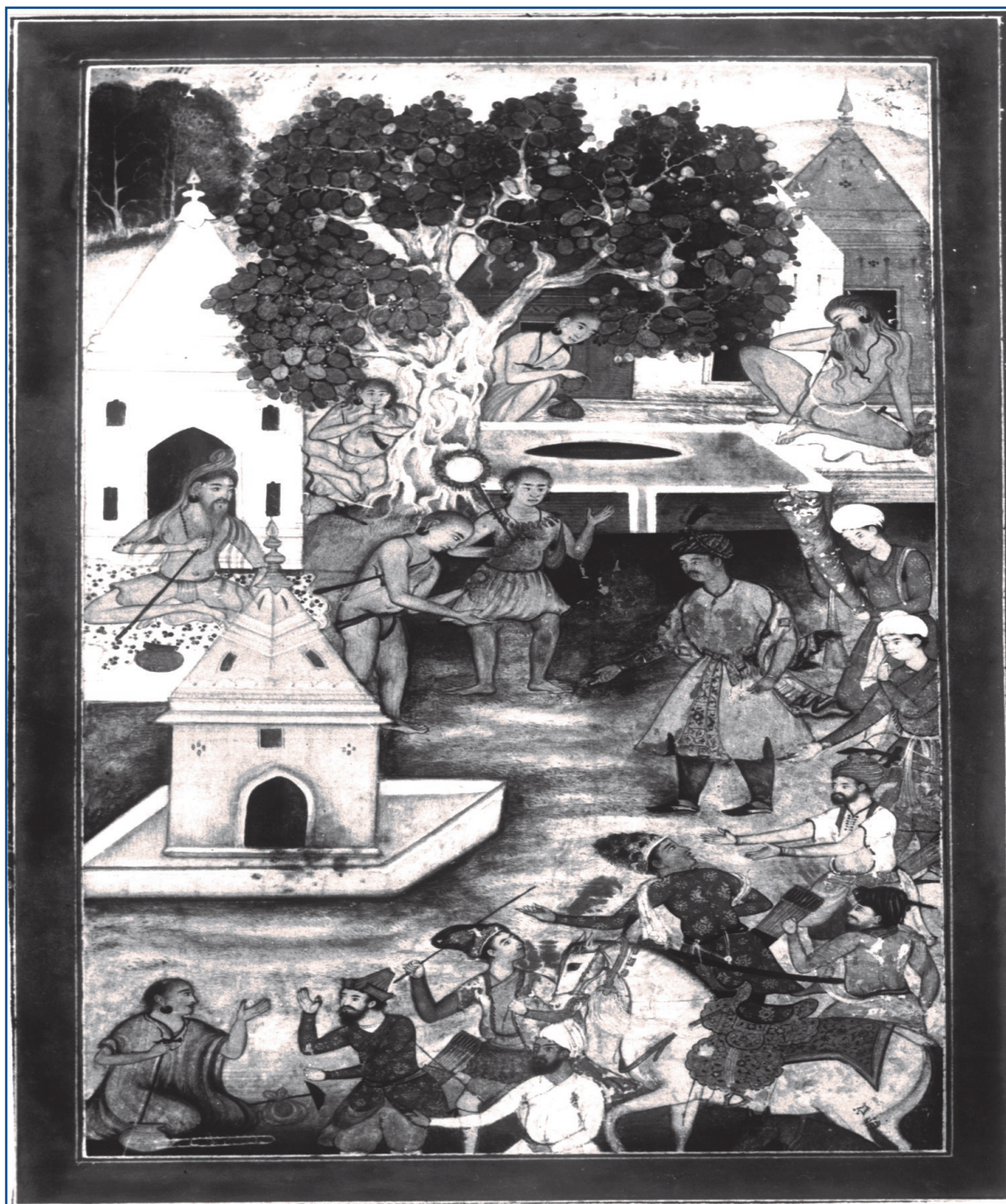
Figures 2 and 3: Old Pictures of the Temple of Govind Dev and its Portal Leading to the Sanctuary.



Note : Raja Man Singh endowed the reconstruction of this temple in 1590 CE.

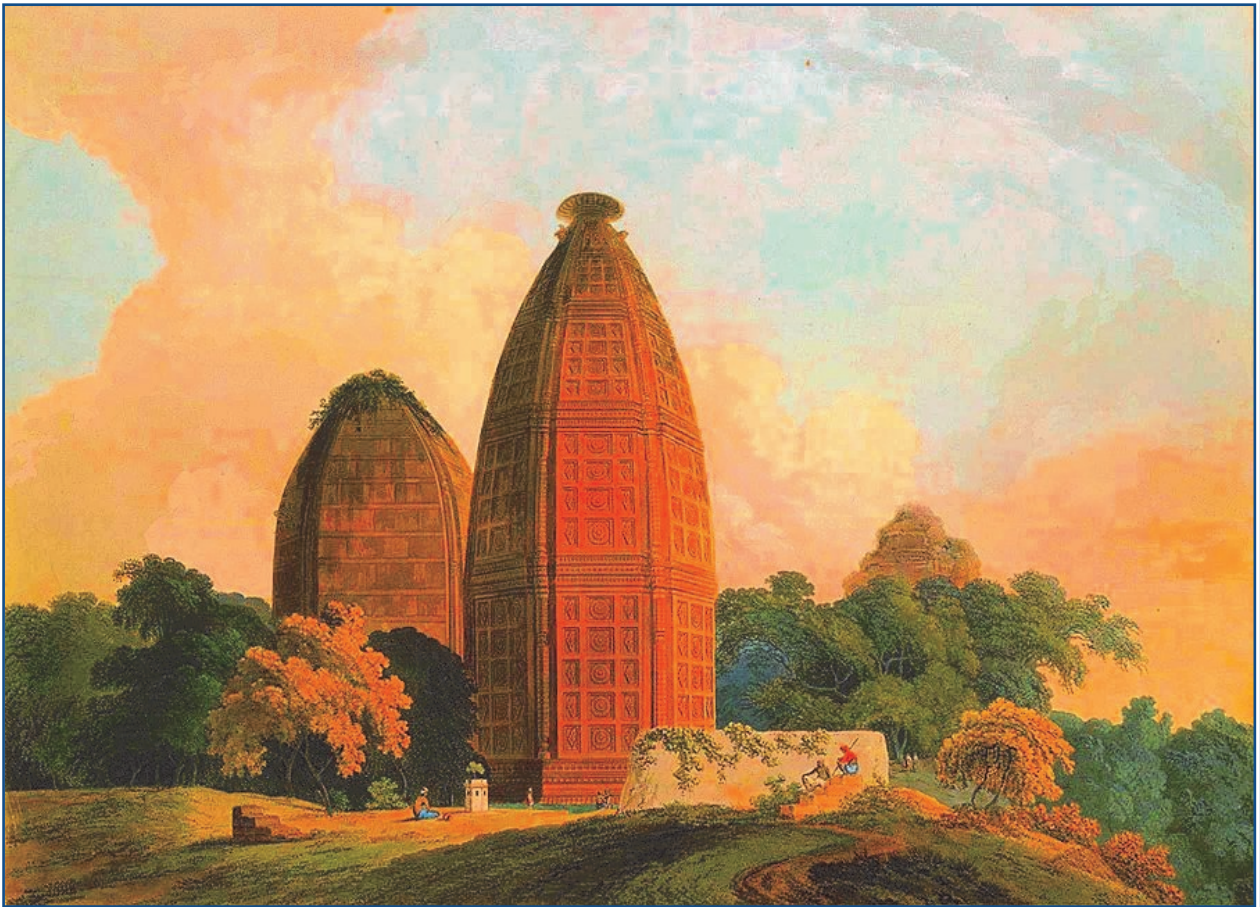
Source: Henry Hardy Cole, Illustrations of Buildings near Muttra and Agra, ASI, illustrating the mixed Hindu- Mahomedan style of upper India, London, India office, 1873, No. 3.'69 and No. 6.'69.

Figure 4: A Painting Depicting 'A Prince Visiting a Sadhu'



A painting depicting 'A Prince visiting a Sadhu', 1615 C.E. Sir Cowasji Jehangir Collection, Bombay. Courtesy : American Institute of Indian Studies , AAB Neg No. A 10.64.

Figure 5 : A Scenic View of the Gaudiya Temple of Madan Mohan



Note : Image is a depiction by Thomas and William Daniell, entitled 'Hindoo temples at Bindrabund on river Jumna'. The temple is said to have been endowed by a merchant named Ram Kapur from Multan during the 16th century.

Source: Oriental Scenery, Part First, Containing Twenty Four Views of the Architecture, Antiquities and Landscape scenery of Hindoostan, by Thomas and William Daniell, No. 9, Cleveland Street, Fitzroy Square, London, January 1, 1812, No. 2.

Figure 6 : Shrinathji, the Primary Deity of Pushtimarg, Being Worshipped by Pushtimargi Goswami Tilkayat.



Note : The deity was shifted to the city of Nathdwara (Rajasthan) in 1672 CE, from its temple located at Govardhan.

Source: 'Shrinathji ki Praktya ki Varta', Vidya Vibhag Mandir Mandal, Nathdwara, 2012.